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ABSTRACT

Foreign language teachers are continually searching for better ways of accessing authentic materials and providing experiences that will improve their students' knowledge and skills. The Internet has transformed communication around the world and can play a major role in the foreign language classroom. This digest illustrates how Internet software can enhance the classroom experience. In addition to the original Internet applications, like FTP (file transfer protocol) for moving files between machines and Telnet for logging into distant computers, the wide range of features and media (text, image, sound, video, multimedia) supported by the current crop of Internet programs makes them powerful additions to the foreign language teacher's repertoire. A number of Internet applications are highlighted that can be used to enrich the foreign language classroom. (VWL)

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Enhancing Authentic Language Learning Experiences Through Internet Technology

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With the focus on language, communication, and culture in the national standards for foreign language learning (*Standards*, 1999), foreign language teachers are continually searching for better ways of accessing authentic materials and providing experiences that will improve their students' knowledge and skills in these target areas. As the Internet has transformed communication around the world, it is natural that it should play a major role in the foreign language classroom.

The instant worldwide connections enabled through the Internet have changed the way people everywhere think about communication, information, and doing business. Although Internet applications are really just computer programs that know how to use the Internet to interact, we view them as an extension of the world that we live in, an extension that brings the world to our fingertips. We can share all sorts of things with the world, get authentic materials from anywhere, and interact with people in distant locations as never before. How can Internet software enhance the classroom experience? In addition to the original Internet applications, like FTP for moving files between machines and Telnet for logging into distant computers, the wide range of features and media (text, image, sound, video, multimedia) supported by the current crop of Internet programs makes them powerful additions to the foreign language teacher's repertoire. This digest highlights a number of Internet applications that can be used to enrich the foreign language classroom.

Electronic Mail

Email was in use before the Internet as we know it today even existed and is still the most commonly used Internet application. Foreign language teachers can integrate email-based activities into their curriculum (LeLoup, 1997; Warschauer, 1995). For example, international keypal projects that enable students to correspond with native speakers of the target language are easily implemented where participants have the necessary access, equipment, and foreign contacts (Knight, 1994; Shelley, 1996). The infrastructure requirements for email are minimal, making it the most available of all Internet tools. Distance learning is another curricular area where email is being used (Ponterio, 1996). Today's email software can handle text in a wide variety of languages, can transmit diacritics, and can include word processed files as attachments. The software also allows us send sound and images as attachments that enhance the context of the written communication.

Electronic Lists

Electronic discussion groups or "lists" (sometimes referred to as "LISTSERVs") use email to provide a forum where people of similar interests can participate in a professional dialog and share resources. Hundreds of lists of interest to language teachers are available on the Internet. (See, for example, http://alabanza.com/kabacoff/Inter-Links/listserv.html to search for scholarly electronic lists.) Some are service lists, such as LLTI (Language Learning Technology International Discussion Forum), which distributes information about all aspects of the technology used in language teaching; and IECC (Intercultural E-Mail Classroom Connections, K-12), which provides a service for teachers seeking partner classrooms for international and cross-cultural electronic mail exchanges. Others are language specific and address topics as specific and diverse as their membership warrants (e.g., AATG, ESPAN-L, TESL-L). FLTEACH (Foreign Language Teaching Forum) is a list that cuts across language lines to discuss methodology, instructional innovation, professional articulation, and enhanced student learning, among other topics. Participation in electronic discussion lists can be a useful tool for professional development, particularly for educators who are isolated geographically or within their districts from other teachers of the same language (LeLoup & Ponterio, 1995a, 1995b).

When participating in discussions, certain rules and protocols (netiquette) should be observed. Following list guidelines and learning how to accurately express and gauge the tenor of a post or response (often by using smiley faces) are very important skills in this faceless communications environment. In addition, some lists are very active, and keeping up with the messages may be a daunting job. Most e-mail software can easily sort mail into separate folders to help manage list messages.

Electronic Journals

Several electronic journals target foreign language professionals. Generally, these journals are free, are published on a regular basis, and do not exist in paper form. There are a number of reasons for publishing a journal online. First, electronic journals can reach a large and diverse audience in a timely manner and without the printing costs of a paper journal. Second, the hypermedia nature of Web-based journals enables articles to include links to related background or reference information located elsewhere on the Web. Third, a number of these journals have a technology focus, and electronic dissemination illustrates many of the technologies treated in a given issue. With good submission policies and a strong editorial board, an online journal can be as dependable as a similarly run traditional journal. Of particular interest are *Language Learning & Technology (LL&T)* (http://llt.msu.edu/) and *Teaching English as a Second Language: An Electronic Journal (TESL-EJ)* (http://www-writing.berkeley.edu/TESL-EJ/).

World Wide Web

The Web browser, usually Netscape or Internet Explorer, is the window through which most people view the Internet. Thanks to its flexibility and integration of other services, the Web represents the broadest and most powerful Internet application, pulling many others in under its umbrella. It has two main defining elements. The hypertext link allows anything on one page to link to any other page in the world, and the ability to combine objects of many different types makes the Web page an excellent format for mixed media. The multimedia nature of the Web and the use of the Web page as an interface to other services have greatly expanded the power of the Internet by making it possible to display information using a combination of formats (Fidelman, 1996). This is essential for the delivery of authentic materials, including texts; images; sound recordings; video clips; virtual reality worlds; and dynamic, interactive presentations. For some media formats, additional helper applications or plug-ins must be downloaded and installed to enhance the Web browser. In addition, sophisticated programming functions, such as CGI, JavaScript, and Dynamic HTML can turn a Web page into an interactive computer program. All this can allow the student to work in interesting ways with the authentic materials found on the page.

Streaming Audio and Video

One way of connecting students with native speakers and authentic A-V materials is by using the technologies of streaming audio and video, which virtually transport the target language environment to the second language classroom without waiting for huge files to download. Students can listen to live radio stations from around the world or hear pre-recorded broadcasts of music, news, sports, and weather. They may watch the nightly news from France or live TV from Chile transmitted to their computer in real-time. One of the many places to find online media of this sort is Media Info (http://emedia1.mediainfo.com/emedia/). This technology keeps getting better thanks to faster computers and better Internet connections. RealPlayer and Media Player are the two most common streaming formats, and both can be freely downloaded.

Search Engines

The Web is so extensive that good tools are needed to help us find authentic materials that correspond to the topics of the foreign language curriculum. A search engine is an online "private eye" that does this detective work for the user. Search engines use keywords to find any site (documents, files, Web pages) that contains the keywords entered by the user. Some even calculate how good the match is so the most likely hits are presented first. The Web is growing and changing so fast that trying to navigate it and locate desired information without search engines would be a formidable task.

The Web has numerous search engines (e.g., Yahoo, Altavista, Google). Each one searches the Internet, creating extensive indexes of all of the words that it finds on all pages in all languages. When it finds links, the search engine examines those pages as well. Although there are language specific engines (e.g., Olé, Encuéntrelo, Crawler.de Suche, Il ragno italiano, LOKACE, ECILA, SAPO), all of these tools work well for many languages. Each one performs a little differently, so it is a good idea to read the "help" page to learn the best techniques for doing simple and advanced searches with the engine you are using. In addition to searches, many of them also provide ready-made collections of pages on specific topics from current events to cooking to business.

Remote Access to Libraries and Databases

Many library catalogs, bibliographic resources, and other types of databases are available on the Internet through a Web browser. Many of these used to be housed in closed systems or on CDs, but more and more are now Internet accessible. The ERIC database is an example of an important resource available via the Web (http://www.accesseric.org/searchdb/searchdb.html), making it easy for teachers to locate Digests, Minibibs, and articles of interest online. The Perseus Project (http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/) includes an online database of classical texts. There are also databases of lesson plans and teaching resources, like RETANET (http://ladb.unm.edu/retanet/) for Latin America.

Chat, Audio and Video Conferencing, Messaging

While much of the Internet is about the presentation of information, instant communication with other individuals allows an interpersonal exchange with a friend around the corner or around the world. Such real-time communication takes place via several different types of chat, conferencing, and messaging programs. One such application is Internet Relay Chat (IRC), which enables synchronous "conversation" among participants anywhere in the world. Users enter a channel and "talk" by typing messages to all of the other people on that channel; everything that is typed is seen instantly by everyone. Hundreds of channels exist, with names usually reflecting the topics and language discussed. Private closed channels can also be created for use in the classroom.

Audio and video conferencing programs, such as CUSeeMe and MS NetMeeting, are options for engaging foreign language students in voice conversation. Users can talk directly to their interlocutor and, using the proper hardware and software, can even see and be seen by the person they are addressing. These applications take a large amount of bandwidth and depend on a good modem connection; network traffic will also affect the results. The development and availability of broadband service through cable-modem and Digital Subscriber Line (DSL), which are much faster than modem access, is making desktop video conferencing a reality for an ever growing number of people.

Messaging software such as ICQ or Instant Messenger provides an instant connection to the people on a user's list of contacts by letting the user know when those people are online. These programs facilitate quick communication by making a connection to an individual as easy as clicking on a name. These new technologies are already powerful and have the potential for tremendous impact on the ability of students to communicate directly with native speakers in target language environments.

Web Course Management

Web course management software is designed for creating and managing online courses but can also be used to support and extend a traditional class by making materials with teacher annotation, glossaries, syllabus, and assignments available to the students through the Web. The collaboration tools built into this software for communicating with and among students have been exploited by language teachers for interactive homework by having students exchange messages in the target language in a real-time chat session or on a closed bulletin board (open only to the students in the class). The computer automatically saves these messages for the teacher. Two examples of course management software are WebCT and Blackboard.

Conclusion

Ultimately, it is incumbent upon the foreign language teacher to integrate these tools into the curriculum in a pedagogically sound and meaningful way. Clearly, target language communication and cultures are easily accessible through current and emerging technologies, and information about using these resources is readily available online. The intrepid and creative teacher will venture into this virtual realm, find authentic resources, and use them to make the second language classroom a marvelous place to learn.

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